

Looking for a new we – learning how to live together with people of different faith and world views

I am very thankful and honoured by the invitation of the organizers of this conference to tell you more about our multimedia website project 'Nieuwwij.nl' – our search for a 'new we' in the Netherlands.

In December 2008 the Study Centre for Theology and Society of the Dutch Dominicans founded this internet platform on interreligious and intercultural communication with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Planning and Environment (VROM). Six years later this site has become one of the most visited sites in the field of religion, spirituality and interreligious dialogue in the Netherlands, with an average of 35.000 unique visitors a month. At our Centre - where we reflect on social reality from a theological point of view - the website was part of a multidisciplinary research project on 'Searching for a new we in the Netherlands'.

How to find social cohesion in a highly individualised and at the same time multicultural and multireligious society? How can we help to create a peaceful and just society that allows for people to live together in a multi-ethnic Europe? How can prejudice and fear projected towards people with other faiths and cultural backgrounds be dismantled without denying the problems that arise when people from different cultures and religions live together? How can we make cultural and religious differences fruitful in order to find *the good life for all*? To me this 'good life for all' is a secular translation of what we call in Christian terms *the kingdom of God*. So, as a Christian theologian I am trying to find a broader language, more inviting words for a mixed audience: religious, spiritual and/or humanist, in order to work together on what I think the message of Jesus, but also of other religions is about: namely 'doing justice to Gods creation and looking after each other with passion and compassion.'

Before showing you what our answer to these questions looks like and how we try to invite people to think and communicate about this 'good life of all', I first would like to elaborate on the social context of the Netherlands, because the New We project is based on an analysis of the Dutch context. Some countries in Europe will have similar political and religious challenges, but of course there is also a great diversity within Europe. So what I will present this morning is not a ready-made Dutch export product for Europe – (or for Sweden) - every country will need its own 'New We' concepts, but perhaps some of our insights will suit your own country.

As you probably know: the Netherlands is one of the most secular countries in Europe. While at the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, only 2 per cent of the population did not belong to a church, nowadays 60 per cent of the Dutch citizens say they have no affiliation with a church community. The number of church members is constantly declining and many young people in the Netherlands today have no idea what Christianity is about. On the other hand nearly 60 per cent of the Dutch people still claim to be a believer. Only 14 per cent call themselves atheists – I think that is a big difference with Sweden. A lot, namely 40 per cent of the people say that they believe in 'iets' – what means 'something' in Dutch, so they got the name 'ietsisten'. These people fall into the category of 'unaffiliated spirituals'. Many of them are patching together elements from the wisdom sayings of different traditions in an individual way. A large number of Dutch citizens do not want to be part of a religious community in the traditional sense anymore. This trend can be seen all over Europe today. In general, European believers do not want to represent a religious group anymore. They prefer to represent just themselves, or perhaps two or three others around them.

On the other hand the Dutch observe with trepidation Muslim solidarity and their sense of a religious 'we', feared because of the events of 9/11 and the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a

young Muslim, born and bred in the Netherlands. But besides fear, it also seems that Dutch people suddenly realize that they themselves no longer have a comparable sense of common identity. What do we actually believe in, and are we still proud of our country and our own culture? These are frequently asked questions. In the demarcation from others - above all from Islam - there has been a recurrence of national feeling, a desire for a well-defined identity and pride in the achievements of Dutch history. The latter was laid down in a cultural canon that children have to learn in school.

This 'proud to be Dutch' approach resulted in a politically inward-oriented gaze, which disregards the fact that the histories of many Dutch people originated elsewhere. They have their roots in Turkey, Greece, China, North and South America, Asia, Africa and so on. Their cultural and religious legacy will also determine the future of the Netherlands. There are African and oriental-looking young women and men in the Netherlands who, as soon as they open their mouth, exhibit an unmistakable local Amsterdam accent, as though their ancestors had never lived anywhere else than in the Jordaan district, the heart of the old city of Amsterdam. They are migrant children who have grown up bi-culturally and often also bi-religiously and who are now, as the second or third generation of migrants, bearers of a hybrid identity. According to statistics one third of the residents in larger cities in Europe have a migration background.

And this year the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam, has joined New York and Toronto by gaining the designation: super-diverse. Super-diverse means that there is no longer a specific group forming a majority. Just under half, that is to say, 49 per cent of the citizens, is from Dutch origin and 51 per cent of the inhabitants of Amsterdam has a migration background, which is of course too diverse to form a new majority. Amsterdam has become a city of minorities - and so the question arises: how to integrate if there is no majority anymore?

We have entered a new era and are facing very clearly a paradigm shift from a mindset of unity to a mindset of multiplicity. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue - learning how to live together with people of different faiths and worldviews - is no longer a kind of 'religious hobby'. It is a necessity. And because it is very important also to reach a younger generation, which is not so much used to reading books but is rather surfing on the world wide web, we built up the multimedia website project 'New We'.

Of course there is much more to say about the Dutch context but first let's go to the We project now and have a look at the trailer:

<http://www.nieuwwij.nl/index.php?pageID=26>

Project *We* uses the slogan *Let's connect the differences* and allows (young) people with different cultural and religious backgrounds to work together. The philosophy behind this slogan is that differences must be faced before something new can be built together. Accepting diversity means learning to think 'in plural'. This is particularly difficult to the western mindset, which is based on binary and unifying concepts. After all, not only the concept of culture of the modern age is modelled after the idea of (national) unity. In Christianity, as well, unity is a central notion. 'We are all one in Jesus Christ', Paul states in order to strengthen the cohesive powers of the first Christian communities. But in the name of that same unity, those who had a different interpretation of faith than those in power in the Church were declared heretics. Unity is not only a unifying concept, but often also a violent one. But can a community be based on diversity? Is it possible not to put 'truths' in the forefront as a unifying element, but instead embark on a common search? Is a truth thinkable, which arises through or in encounter and provides room for people with multiple or other religious identities?

Project *We* is not about giving answers in the first place but about asking questions. It aims at picturing the creativity and energy of people in the neighbourhoods of towns and villages and stimulating their ability to find their own solutions, making new common initiatives possible on a small scale. The project wants to stimulate people to take their responsibility and to show their strength instead of taking on the part of the victim. The 'Generation Y' video team, for instance, records projects and people who are still working on this 'new we', making them accessible to a wider Dutch-speaking audience. Besides virtual connections the website also features real live interfaith encounters. One of the most successful activities is a weekend in which Muslims and Christians are staying together in a monastery. The aim is getting to know each other better, building friendships and understanding the religious values in each other's lives. Much of the material is also used in schools and other multicultural meetings, as well as in lectures about 'a new we in your neighbourhood'.

Without denying that living amid all those differences entails problems, project *We* focuses on the positive developments in an increasingly plural country. By doing this, *We* wants to motivate people to work on shaping their own lives and society in a constructive and creative way - for words and images are not innocent. They are not only a reflection of reality, but also creating reality themselves.

Instead of fostering fear and cynicism, project *We* wants to promote the development of a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful through participation. The right to 'be different' is an achievement within liberal democracy. The struggle about the question which values should be defining society is part of this democratic process. So the debate on this question, in my view, must not be seen as a problem but as a privilege. In an open society that strives for individual emancipation as a human right, there will always be conflicts of interests. The common ground is that people comply with the law, with the rules that are laid down in the Constitution.

As long as diversity is associated with loss of identity and relativism of values, and the convictions of 'the other' are seen as a threat to one's own identity, there will be no room for a new *We*. Mutual acceptance and equality, while retaining and respecting the differences, are indispensable ingredients for the development of new sustainable connections. This is why we chose the motto 'We - connects the differences'. It underlines the necessity not to downplay differences in favour of commonalities in the search for mutual connections. *We* advocates facing the differences and making them fruitful - moving away from the *either/or* thinking and searching beyond prejudices with an open mind for an *and/and* approach.

The important questions are: How can we conquer fear for the other? How can we connect without having to become the same? What is at stake, is not the search for a new big *We*, but rather the existence of small 'we's', dependent on mutual communication and making connections.

Breaking down prejudice by encounters, promoting knowledge about and providing inspiration from the various religious traditions, stimulating communication about them with a view to creating a peaceful and just society: this is what project *We* aims at. It is the longing for new ways of connectedness – new ways of feeling at home.

In order to really feel at home, the former British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks underscores the importance of being able to make your own contribution to society. For him, society is like a home we must build together. Only if you have also given shape to it, made your contribution, you can proudly say: this is also my achievement. Only then will you feel at home. And it goes without saying

that you are entitled to recognition of your contribution then. Try to find shared interests, is his advice, and decorate the home you are going to build together with beautiful details from the different traditions in which each of you grew up. Celebrate the festivals together - Christmas, Chanukah, Chinese New Year, the Sugar Feast, Diwali – and take the values from the different religious traditions as inspiration for a common ethics – for example compassion or hospitality. If we do this, diversity is wealth. And the more differences are included into the house, the more beauty and wealth it will contain, so he says. But do not forget to reserve your own space as well, a room in which you can withdraw for the sake of balance between togetherness and uniqueness.

To me it is very clear that if I want to take the signs of the times seriously and seek for ‘the good life for all’ amid the messiness of daily life I must give room to multiplicity. Multiplicity not only in my own Christian circle - no matter how important and relevant this may be - but in particular in the sense of giving room to the voices of the religious and spiritual stranger in our midst.

The burning question is: Will I allow this? Will I allow that this other interrupts my own narrative and disrupts my peace? That he or she exposes the assumptions in my thinking and acting, and questions my complacency? Do I have the courage to have my own limited view on the world expanded, meaning I may have to face things I would rather not see? In short: do I make the other into an *alter ego*, into the projection of my own desires or do I sustain the opaque unicity of every human being? Together with Emmanuel Levinas I would plead for the latter: no practice of ‘egology’, not determining the other from my own ego and reducing him or her to myself, but letting myself be surprised by the opacity of the other. For the Heidelberg theologian and missiologist Theo Sundermeier, who lived and worked in Africa for many years and who is an expert in the field of intercultural communication, wonder is the beginning of all hermeneutics. He writes:

“In wonder, I am open for the little, the humble, and in this I discover otherness, beauty, multiplicity. He who is surprised, is capable of endure dissonance with resignation and will not look for harmony too easily. For the dissonant, as well, belongs to the fullness of life.”¹

Today, doing theology means going to the virtual marketplace, where people meet each other in very different ways, playing with identities, narratives, imagination and desires and where God can be found in many spiritual guises. The game of theology has changed. The (non)religious other becomes a *locus theologicus*. Which has as its consequence that the slogan ‘unity in diversity’ should be replaced by ‘diversity in search of connections’, searching for a new *We*. Or, better, searching for small *We*’s which are able to connect in a network which does not cherish the desire for fusion but can make a difference by building a society in which everyone can feel at home.

Whoever thinks that this is a utopian and naive idealism, is mistaken. It is the reality of the twenty-first century. The century in which the neo-liberal market thinking within a nation state - and the related excesses of egocentric wealth accumulation at the expense of both the majority of humankind and the earth’s natural resources - is running on empty. Creating social cohesion needs new and just connections on a local and global scale. A spirituality of the good life for all is an urgent necessity. Maybe it's time to look beyond the borders of the Netherlands, under the motto: Looking for a new *We* in Europe by connecting the differences.

I think religions can play an important role in this whole process. Of course we need the separation of religion and state, but this does not mean that religious people are forced to become

¹ T. Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 184-185 (transl. MK).

schizophrenic – because they have to leave their personal religious inspiration for living their life behind the front door. I think there must be room in public space for non-religious and religious answers to questions on the meaning of life, because religious traditions have a wealth of stories and values that can help to give direction to the search of a new we good life for all.

In spite of the secular prediction that religion will disappear, religion is still an important power in the lives of people all over the world – even in the secularized countries of Europe. We cannot deny that. So I would like to say to everybody who is engaged in religion and public life: Be aware of the images and words you are using about religion(s), because – as I said before – words and images do not only reflect a reality, they also create a reality. Religious people can be bridge builders, they can help promote the positive forces of religion without denying that religion has negative power as well. In the end it is a personal choice which aspect of religion you want to show to the public.

And let's face it, creating a 'New We' movement does not only require a transformation of a 'we' that excludes people, it also needs a new 'I'. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you want to see in the world." To him the most important battle to fight, was overcoming his own demons, fears, and insecurities.

I think he is right – a 'new we' begins with a new I – with a *metanoia*, of my own habits and ways of thinking.

Manuela Kalsky

For more information: www.manuelakalsky.net en www.nieuwwij.nl